Content-based Instruction

Introduction

Howatt (1984) notes that there are two versions of the Communicative Approach: a strong version and a weak version. The weak version, which we illustrated in the previous chapter, recognizes the importance of providing learners with opportunities to practice English for communicative purposes. For instance, we saw in the CLT lesson we observed that students were provided with a great deal of practice in learning the forms for a particular function, i.e. predicting. The **strong version** of the Communicative Approach goes beyond giving students opportunities to practice communication. The strong version asserts that language is acquired through communication. The **weak version** could be described as 'learning to use' English; the strong version entails 'using English to learn it' (Howatt 1984: 279). Content-based instruction, which we explore in this chapter, and task-based and participatory approaches, which we will look at in the next two chapters, belong in the strong-version category. While the three may seem different at first glance, what they have in common is that they give priority to communicating, over predetermined linguistic content, teaching through communication rather than for it.

Before we examine the three approaches in detail, two points need to be made. First, some language educators might object to the inclusion of content-based, task-based, and participatory approaches in a methods book, for they might be more comfortable calling these 'syllabus types'. Nevertheless, others feel that a 'method' designation is very appropriate. Snow (1991), for instance, characterizes content-based instruction as a 'method with many faces'— both to make the case for content-based instruction as a method of language teaching and to portray the great variety of forms and settings in which it takes place. In addition, Kumaravadivelu (1993) observes that the term 'task' is often used with reference to both content and methodology of language teaching. Indeed, within the strong version of a communicative

approach, the traditional separation of syllabus design and methodology is blurred. If students learn to communicate by communicating (Breen 1984), then the destination and the route become one and the same (Nunan 1989).

Second, some might question whether the three are different enough to be treated separately. For example, Skehan (1998) makes the point that one could regard much content-based instruction (as well as project work, which we will briefly discuss in the next chapter) as particular examples of a task-based approach. And others have suggested that task-based and participatory approaches are a form of content-based instruction. In any case, although it should be acknowledged that these methods are unified by the assumption that students learn to communicate by communicating, their scope and their particular foci seem distinctive enough to warrant independent treatment, which we do, starting in this chapter with content-based instruction.

Rationale for Content-based Instruction

Using content from other disciplines in language courses is not a new idea. For years, specialized language courses have treated content relevant to a particular profession or academic discipline. So, for example, the content of a language course for airline pilots is different from one for computer technicians. This is usually thought of as teaching a **language for specific purposes**. In an academic setting, it might be called teaching **language for academic purposes**. Other examples of language programs that use specific content to teach language to adults are programs that teach workplace literacy for adult immigrants and competency-based programs, which serve the same population. In the former, adult learners learn at their workplace to read and write about content that relates to what they need in their work environment, for example, being able to read technical manuals. In **competency-based instruction**, adults learn language skills by studying vital 'life-coping' or 'survival' skills, such as filling out job applications or using the telephone.

The special contribution of content-based instruction (CBI)[1] is that it is not exclusively a language program, but instead it integrates the learning of language with the learning of some other content. The content can be themes, i.e. some topic such as popular music or sports in which students are interested. Often, the content is academic subject matter (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 2003). It has been observed that academic subjects provide natural content for language study. Such observations motivated the 'language across the curriculum' movement for native English speakers in England, which was

[1] For the sake of simplicity, for the remainder of this chapter, we will use CBI to mean the integration of language and content in instruction.

launched in the 1970s to integrate the teaching of reading and writing into all other subject areas. In Canada, second language immersion programs, in which Anglophone children learn their academic subjects in French, have existed for many years. In the United States, CBI instruction was begun to help English language learners in public schools.[2] It had been found that when English language learners (ELLs) were put in regular school classes with native speakers of English, some ELLs did not master either content or English. On the other hand, when these students studied English first, their study of academic content was delayed. In order to prevent both problems, instructors teach academic subjects, such as history or science, while also teaching the language that is related to that content. Language thus becomes the medium for learning content (Mohan 1986).

In the European context, the name for the same instructional approach is content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Marsh defines CLIL as:

> … any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content.
> (Marsh 2002: 15)

'This approach can be viewed as being neither language learning, nor subject learning, but rather an amalgam of both' (Marsh 2008: 233). In recent years, a number of countries (Estonia, Finland, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Spain) have implemented a widespread CLIL approach to language and content learning.

Since CBI and CLIL are growing rapidly, it would be good to interject a note of caution here. The teaching of language to younger and younger learners has taken place around the world, partly because governments are not satisfied with what is achieved in language study, and partly because the young learners' parents naturally want their children to have the opportunities in life that knowledge of another language potentially affords. However, this drive to teach young learners an additional language needs to be carefully considered with regard to two important factors. First, it is important for children to establish literacy in their native language before learning to read and write another language. Second, it is important to draw on what is known about how children learn in order to develop a program that meets their needs (Cameron 2003; California State Department of Education 2010). It is not simply the case that the earlier the better when it comes to language instruction.

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[2] Although it has since been used with other populations, such as university students (see Byrnes 2005).

Naturally, when students do study academic subjects in another language, they will need a great deal of assistance in understanding subject matter texts and in learning to use the academic language associated with the subject. Therefore, teachers must have clear language objectives as well as content learning objectives for their lessons. Sherris underscores this point by using the language of mathematics as an example:

> For instance, in planning to teach the concept of quadratic equations, a teacher might construct the following possible outcome statement: 'Students will be able to solve quadratic equations, discuss different methods of solving the same quadratic equations, and write a summary of each method.' Solve, discuss, and write are the descriptive verbs that determine whether a particular outcome addresses the knowledge and skill of a content area or specific language functions. Solving a quadratic equation describes a content outcome, whereas discussing and writing about the methods used to solve a quadratic equation describe language outcomes related to the content.
> (Sherris 2008: 1)

Of course, considering the verbs in the objectives is only the first step. Teachers of CBI have to be concerned with language objectives that include vocabulary, structure, and discourse organization. We will see how these are implemented by observing the following lesson.

Experience

Let us step into the classroom, where a sixth grade class in an international school in Taipei is studying both geography and English through content-based instruction.[3] Most of the students are Chinese speakers, but there are several who speak Japanese natively and a few who speak Korean. Their English proficiency is at a low intermediate level. The teacher asks the students in English what a globe is. A few call out 'world.' Others make a circle with their arms. Others are silent. The teacher then reaches under her desk and takes out a globe. She puts the globe on the desk and asks the students what they know about it.

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[3] This lesson is based partly on Cristelli (1994) 'An Integrated, Content-based Curriculum for Beginning Level English as a Second Language Learners of Middle School Age: Four Pilot Units,' an Independent Professional Project, School for International Training.

Figure 10.1 Teaching a geography lesson through the medium of English

They call out answers enthusiastically as she records their answers on the board. When they have trouble explaining a concept, the teacher supplies the missing language. Next, she distributes a handout that she has prepared, based on a video, 'Understanding Globes.' The top section on the handout is entitled 'Some Vocabulary to Know.' Listed are some key geographical terms used in the video. The teacher asks the students to listen as she reads the 10 words: 'degree,' 'distance,' 'equator,' 'globe,' 'hemisphere,' 'imaginary,' 'latitude,' 'longitude,' 'model,' 'parallel.'

Below this list is a modified cloze passage. The teacher tells the students to read the passage. They should fill in the blanks in the passage with the new vocabulary where they are able to do so. After they are finished, she shows them the video. As they watch the video, they fill in the remaining blanks with certain of the vocabulary words that the teacher has read aloud.

The passage begins:

A _____ is a three-dimensional _____ of the earth. Points of interest are located on a globe by using a system of_____ lines. For instance, the equator is an imaginary line that divides the earth in half. Lines that are parallel to the equator are called lines of _____ . Latitude is used to measure _____on the earth north and south of the equator …

After the video is over, the students pair up to check their answers.

Next, the teacher calls attention to a particular verb pattern in the cloze passage: *are located*, *are called*, *is used*, etc. She tells students that these are examples of the present passive, which they will be studying in this lesson and later in the week. She explains that the passive is used to 'defocus' the agent or doer of an action. In fact, in descriptions of the sort that they have just read, the agent of the action is not mentioned at all because the agent is not relevant.

The teacher then explains how latitude and longitude can be used to locate any place in the world. She gives them several examples. She has the students use latitude and longitude coordinates to locate cities in other countries. By stating 'This city is located at 60° north latitude and 11° east longitude,' the teacher integrates the present passive and the content focus at the same time. Hands go up. She calls on one girl to come to the front of the room to find the city. She correctly points to Oslo, Norway, on the globe. The teacher provides a number of other examples.

Later, the students play a guessing game. In small groups, they think of the names of five cities. They then locate the city on the globe and write down the latitude and longitude coordinates. When they are finished, they read the coordinates out loud and see if the other students can guess the name of the city. The first group says: 'This city is located at 5° north latitude and 74° west longitude.' After several misses by their classmates, group 4 gets the correct answer: 'Bogotá.' Group 4 then give the others new coordinates: 'This city is located at 34° south latitude and 151° east longitude.' The answer: 'Sydney!'

Next, the teacher tells the students that they will do a dictogloss. The teacher reads to the students two paragraphs about Australia. The first time she reads them, the students are supposed to listen for the main ideas. The second time she reads them, she tells the students to listen for details. Following the second reading, she explains to the students that they should reconstruct what she has read as much as they can from memory. The students are hard at work. After 10 minutes, she tells them to discuss their drafts with a partner and that the two partners should combine and edit their drafts into one, making it as close as possible to the original. She then has each pair of students read their draft to the other students, and the class votes on which version is the closest to the original. The teacher points out how the paragraphs are organized, with a general opening sentence followed by specific examples.

For homework, the students are given a description of Australia and a **graphic organizer** to help them organize and recall the new information. They have to read the description and label the major cities and points of interest on the map and complete the items in the graphic organizer.

AUSTRALIA

Australia is the 6th largest country in the world. With an area of 7,692,000 sq km, it has a relatively small population of around 22.5 million people. Its largest city is Sydney, home of the famous Opera House and Harbour Bridge, and is located on the east coast to the north-east of the capital city, Canberra. Other major cities include Melbourne, in the south, and Perth, which is situated on the west coast, over 3,500 km from the capital.

Australia's highest peak, Mount Kosciuszko, is relatively small at 2,228 metres and is situated in Kosciuszko National Park. Australia has many national parks including Kakadu, the largest national park in Australia, which covers almost 2,000 sq km, and Karijini, which features spectacular waterfalls and gorges. Other places of interest include Alice Springs, in the heart of the Australian outback and situated in the centre of the country. To the south-west of Alice Springs is Uluru (Ayers Rock), a huge sandstone rock and an Aboriginal sacred site situated in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park.

There are many other famous attractions. Situated off the north-east coast, visitors can marvel at the Great Barrier Reef – the world's largest coral reef. Further south, beach lovers may wish to visit The Gold Coast, a 70 km stretch of golden sand running along Australia's east coast.

Label the map with the following:

Sydney	Alice Springs
Melbourne	The Gold Coast
Perth	Uluru
Canberra	The Great Barrier Reef

Facts

Capital City: _____

Largest City: _____

Area: _____

Population: _____

Highest Point: _____
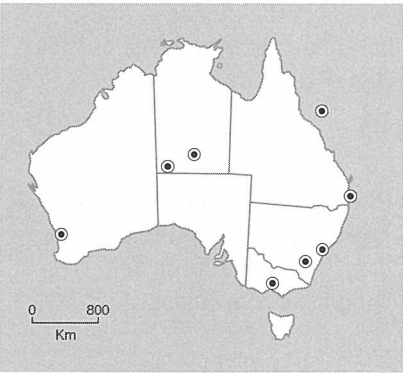
National Parks: _____

Figure 10.2 An example of a graphic organizer

Thinking about the Experience

Let us follow our customary procedure by listing our observations and the principles that underlie them.

Observations	Principles
1 The class is studying geography through the target language.	Both the content and the language are targets for learning.
2 The teacher asks the students what they know about a globe.	Teaching should build on students' previous experience.
3 The teacher supplies the missing language when the students have trouble in explaining a concept in the target language.	The teacher scaffolds the linguistic content, i.e. helps learners say what it is they want to say by building a complete utterance together with the students.
4 The students call out their answers enthusiastically as the teacher writes them on the blackboard.	When learners perceive the relevance of their language use, they are motivated to learn. They know that it is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.
5 The teacher reads the new vocabulary and then the students watch a video entitled 'Understanding Globes.'	Language is learned most effectively when it is used as a medium to convey content of interest to the students.
6 The students fill in the vocabulary words in the blanks in the modified cloze passage as they watch the video.	Vocabulary is easier to acquire when there are contextual clues to help convey meaning. It is important to integrate all the skills, as well as vocabulary and grammar in an authentic context.
7 The teacher provides a number of examples using the present passive with latitude and longitude coordinates.	When they work with authentic subject matter, students need language support. For instance, the teacher may provide a number of examples, build in some redundancy, use comprehension checks, etc.
8 The students are given the latitude and longitude coordinates, and they have to come to the front of the classroom to find the city on the globe.	Learners work with meaningful, cognitively demanding language and content within the context of authentic material and tasks.

9 The teacher uses a dictogloss. She discusses its organization.	It is important for students to learn the discourse organization of academic texts.
10 For homework, the students are given a graphic organizer, which they are to label based on a descriptive reading they have been given.	Graphic organizers help students develop the skills that they need to learn academic content.

Reviewing the Principles

Let us now see what principles underlie content-based instruction by answering our usual 10 questions and considering a number of additional principles.

1 What are the goals of teachers who use CBI?

In a CBI class, teachers want the students to master both language and content. The content can be themes of general interest to students, such as current events or their hobbies, or it can be an academic subject, which provides natural content for the study of language. Teachers do not want to delay students' academic study or language study, so teachers encourage the development of both simultaneously.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

The teacher needs to set clear learning objectives for both content and language. The teacher then creates activities to teach both, **scaffolding** the language needed for study of the content. The students' role is to engage actively with both content and language, using each to learn the other.

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?

Teachers must help learners understand authentic texts. Teachers make meaning clear through the use of visuals, realia, repeating, and by giving a lot of examples, building on students' previous experiences. Teachers also design activities that address both language and content, and the discourse organization of the content, with specific language activities highlighting how language is used in a particular subject—the language of mathematics (Ball and Goffney 2006) differs from the language for history (Schleppegrell, Achugar, and Oteiza 2004), for example. Students are actively involved in learning language and content, often through interaction with other students. Thinking skills are also taught in order to help students undertake academic tasks. Graphic organizers are one tool used to assist this process.

4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction?

The teacher guides student learning. She supports them by having students pay attention to how language is used to deliver content and by scaffolding their language development. Students often work collaboratively to understand content while actively using the language they are studying.

5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

It is assumed that learning content and language together keeps students interested and motivated. They understand the relevance of what they are studying and that language is a means to an end.

6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?

Language is meaningful and a medium through which content is conveyed. Culture is addressed in teaching to the extent that it is present in the content area being studied.

7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

The content determines what language is worked on. The language includes not only vocabulary items and grammar structures, but also how these contribute to the discourse organization of texts. All four skills are integrated in authentic contexts.

8 What is the role of the students' native language?

There is no overt role for the students' native language.

9 How is evaluation accomplished?

Students are evaluated on their knowledge of content and their language ability.

10 How does the teacher respond to student errors?

The teacher corrects student errors by giving students the correct form or allowing students to self-correct. She notes the errors, and recycles content to ensure that students are learning to use language they will need in a school context.

● **Teacher Preparation**

CBI inspires questions about appropriate teacher preparation. Clearly teachers need to have content and language knowledge and teaching skills. Teacher preparation can also help teachers to understand the rationale for integrated instruction and give them practice designing lessons with language and content objectives, and interesting, stimulating

content material. One well-known resource is the **Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)** (Short and Echevarria 1999), which helps teachers by describing effective practices. **Sheltered-language instruction**, such as in the lesson we observed, supports students through the use of particular instructional techniques and materials such as specialized vocabulary-building activities, graphic organizers, and cloze activities.

In some settings, team teaching has been adopted, with one teacher in the class focusing on content and another on language support. At the university level, sometimes an **adjunct model** is used. In the adjunct model for university students, students enroll in a regular academic course. In addition, they take a language course that is linked to the academic course. During the language class, the language teacher's focus is on helping students process the language in order to understand the academic content presented by the content teacher. The language teacher also helps students to complete academic tasks such as writing term papers, improving their note-taking abilities, and reading academic textbooks assigned by the content teacher.

What all CBI models have in common is learning both specific content and related language skills. 'In content-based language teaching, the claim in a sense is that students get 'two for one'—both content knowledge and increased language proficiency' (Wesche 1993).

Whole Language

Before moving on, it would be worthwhile to touch briefly upon one more approach here since its philosophy has much in common with CBI. Although it originated in classes for children who speak English as a native language, the Whole Language Approach has often been used with second language learners as well. The Whole Language (WL) approach, as the name suggests, calls for language to be regarded holistically, rather than as pieces, i.e. the vocabulary words, grammar structures, and pronunciation points. In other words, students work from the **top-down**, attempting first to understand the meaning of the overall text before they work on the linguistic forms comprising it. This contrasts with the **bottom-up** approach we have seen in other methods in this book, where students learn a language piece by piece and then work to put the pieces in place, constructing whole meaningful texts out of the pieces. It is thought that the top-down process will work best when students are engaged in purposeful use of language, and not learning linguistic forms for their own sake. 'Therefore WL [Whole Language] educators provide content-rich curriculum where language and thinking can be about interesting and significant content' (Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores 1991: 11). WL educators see errors as part of learning

and they encourage students to experiment with reading and writing to promote both their enjoyment and ownership.

WL and CBI educators embrace the ideas of Vygotsky (1978) about the social nature of learning. As a social process, it is assumed that learning is best served by collaboration between teacher and students and among students. According to Vygotsky, it is through social interaction that higher order thinking emerges. The 'place' where this is most likely to be facilitated is in the **zone of proximal development (ZPD)**:

> … the distance between the actual developmental level [of the learner] as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.
> (Vygotsky 1978: 86)

One example of such a technique to teach WL is the Language Experience Approach. Two writing techniques that are consonant with WL philosophy are process writing and journal keeping. All three of these techniques are described in the next section.

Reviewing the Techniques

- **Dictogloss**
In a dictogloss (Wajnryb 1990), students listen twice to a short talk or a reading on appropriate content. The first time through, students listen for the main idea, and then the second time they listen for details. Next, students write down what they have remembered from the talk or reading. Some teachers have their students take notes while listening. The students then use their notes to reformulate what has been read. Students get practice in note-taking in this way. Next, they work with a partner or in a small group to construct together the best version of what they have heard. What they write is shared with the whole class for a peer-editing session. Through these processes, students become familiar with the organization of a variety of texts within a content area.

- **Graphic Organizers**
Graphic organizers are visual displays that help students to organize and remember new information. They involve drawing or writing down ideas and making connections. They combine words and phrases, symbols, and arrows to map knowledge. They include diagrams, tables, columns, and webs. Through the use of graphic organizers, students can understand text organization, which helps them learn to read academic texts and to

complete academic tasks, such as writing a summary of what they have read. A key rationale for the use of graphic organizers in CBI is that they facilitate recall of cognitively demanding content, enabling students to process the content material at a deeper level and then be able to use it for language practice.

Language Experience Approach

Students take turns dictating a story about their life experiences to the teacher who writes it down in the target language. Each student then practices reading his or her story with the teacher's assistance. The Language Experience Approach applies the principles of WL: The text is about content that is significant to the students, it is collaboratively produced, it is whole, and since it is the student's story, the link between text and meaning is facilitated.

Process Writing

Traditionally, when teachers teach writing, they assign topics for students to write on; perhaps they do a bit of brainstorming about the topic during a pre-writing phase, and then have students write about the topic without interruption. Subsequently, teachers collect and evaluate what students have written. Such instruction is very 'product-oriented;' there is no involvement of the teacher in the act or 'process' of writing. In process writing, on the other hand, students may initially brainstorm ideas about a topic and begin writing, but then they have repeated conferences with the teacher and the other students, during which they receive feedback on their writing up to that point, make revisions, based on the feedback they receive, and carry on writing. In this way, students learn to view their writing as someone else's reading and to improve both the expression of meaning and the form of their writing as they draft and redraft. Process writing shifts the emphasis in teaching writing from evaluation to revision.

Dialogue Journals

Another way to work on literacy skills is to have students keep dialogue journals. The particular way that journals are used varies, but it essentially involves students writing in their journals in class or for homework regularly, perhaps after each class or once a week. There may be a particular focus for the writing, such as the students' expressing their feelings toward how and what they are learning, or the writing focus could be on anything that the student wishes to communicate to the teacher. Usually it is the teacher who 'dialogues' with the student, i.e. is the audience for the journal. The teacher reads the student's journal entry and writes a response to it, but does not correct its form.

Conclusion

Content-based instruction, with all its many faces, offers teachers a way of addressing issues of language and content learning and allows students to make ongoing progress in both. This can provide an efficient manner of learning, ensuring that students are not left behind while learning language or while learning content. For this reason, CBI can also be an effective way for students to learn language in the language class, using themes that students find of interest. Such themes provide sustained motivation beyond intermediate levels of proficiency and prepare students, if they choose, for the transition to content area classes in school, college, or university. Some questions for your consideration: What do you see as the benefits to learners of integrating content and language? Are there situations that would not be appropriate for the use of content-based instruction? Do you think that content-based instruction lends itself to certain age groups more than others? Why or why not?

Activities

A Check your understanding of Content-based Instruction.

1 In your own words describe the difference between the approach to teaching communication taken in the previous chapter and this one.
2 Why do you think that CBI has been called a method with many faces (Snow 1991)?
3 What type(s) of preparation might be useful for a teacher who will teach content along with language?

B Apply what you have understood about Content-based Instruction.

1 Even if you do not teach in a program that regularly uses CBI, try incorporating the teaching of content into your language class. Teach a poem or adopt a theme of interest to your students, for instance. See what you learn from that experience.
2 How are process writing and journal keeping consistent with the Whole Language Approach? Can you think of any other writing techniques which are?

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